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ABSTRACT

This study examined the gender differences in moral orientation among 162 children, ages 11 through 13. Subjects were enrolled in the Minnesota Mother-Child Interaction Project, a longitudinal study of high-risk children and their families. Semi-structured interviews were used to determine each child's ability to understand and use moral orientations in the resolution of moral conflict. The interviews involved presenting a fable dilemma and asking how the subject would resolve it. Results of these interviews were then correlated with teacher rankings of emotional health, peer competence, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, school motivation, and verbal ability. Girls scored significantly higher on ability to use and understand care and used significantly more care considerations than boys. For boys, justice reasoning was correlated with emotional health and verbal ability, whereas for girls care correlated with verbal ability. (A copy of the fable dilemma is appended.) (MDM)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN MORAL ORIENTATION: RESULTS FROM AN EXAMINATION OF CONCURRENT CORRELATES

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Poster presented at the 1993 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, Louisiana (March 25-28, 1993)

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ABSTRACT

Controversy exists regarding the existence of gender differences in moral orientation. This study sought to widen the scope of research on moral orientation by examining both mean gender differences and concurrent correlates of quantitative and qualitative orientation indices by sex. Subjects were 162 children, ages 11-13. The sample was 80% white and 20% mixed minority groups and included 85 boys and 77 girls.

Girls were found to score higher than boys on a quantitative care scale and to use more care concerns. Different patterns of concurrent correlates were found for each sex, particularly among qualitative indices. Orientation of preferred solution was highly associated with school adaptation for girls. Results are discussed in terms of research implications for moral orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Since Gilligan's (1982) initial proposals regarding the existence of a second moral perspective, the care orientation, the controversy regarding the viability of the moral orientation construct has been largely dominated by questions of gender differences (Walker, 1991). Efforts to examine her initial claims that care reasoning is prominent in females and not sufficiently captured by standard moral reasoning measures or adequately represented in all-male research samples have produced inconsistent results. However, this controversy has at times obscured the contributions of this work to a fuller understanding of morality, and perhaps hindered the employment of alternative measurement strategies and research designs which could potentiate examination of more complex questions than the strict gender by orientation issue.

Because measurement issues cloud some of the findings on moral orientation, this study also examined several indices of orientation that have been commonly used in previous studies with children.

AIMS

Research regarding moral orientation has been dominated by questions of gender differences in care and justice reasoning. Following Block (1984), the current study examined gender differences on both criterion variables and the correlates of those variables. This research sought to widen the scope of moral orientation research by examining the following questions regarding differences in orientation usage:

1) Do boys and girls differ in their abilities to understand and use the care and justice orientations?
2) Do quantitative measures of orientation usage have different concurrent correlates in the school environment of usage for each gender?
3) Do qualitative indices of moral orientation use and preference relate differentially by gender to concurrent indices of school functioning?

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 162 subjects enrolled in the Minnesota Mother-Child Interaction Project, a longitudinal study of high-risk children and their families. Eighty-seven boys and 75 girls comprised the sample. Racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample was approximately 80% Caucasian, 13% Black, and 7% Native American and Chicano. Upon enrollment, mothers were

predominantly young, single, low in educational and occupational status, and a large proportion had unwanted pregnancies. Subjects with IQs below 70 were excluded from the analyses.

Measures and Procedures

Moral Orientation was assessed with an individually administered, semi-structured interview designed to assess a child's ability to understand and use each moral orientation in the resolution of a moral conflict. The fable interview was an adaptation of Johnston's (1985/8) procedure consisting of a hypothetical dilemma embedded in a fable to which children were asked to provide solutions (see Appendix A). Initial questioning was open-ended and concentrated on the child's rationale for what made his/her solution a "good way to solve the problem." The child was next asked if there were other ways to solve the problem to assess the ability to spontaneously switch orientations. If unable to elaborate either orientation spontaneously, gradually directing probes were used to determine the degree to which the child could understand and use that orientation.

Ability to use and understand care and justice reasoning was rated on seven point scales developed by the author, who was trained in the scoring of moral orientation at a workshop conducted by Gilligan and her colleagues. Coders underlined each moral consideration in the subject's response and categorized it under a checklist of particular criteria for each orientation. Orientation scores were assigned based on the ***readiness*** with which they used the orientation, the degree to which they displayed thorough ***understanding*** of the orientation, and the ***conviction*** with which they advocated it across the entire interview transcript.

Several additional orientation indices were obtained from the interview data. The orientation evidenced in subjects' first and preferred solutions were classified into one of the following three categories: care predominant, blended/both orientation, or justice predominant. Frequency counts of the total number of both care and justice considerations were also recorded. These allowed determination of "modal orientation" (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988), defined as the orientation from which a majority of considerations were provided.

The interviews were transcribed and each was scored by two coders blind to subjects' sex and developmental histories. Final scores were arrived at by conferencing. Spearman-Brown reliability estimates of conferenced scores for the justice and care scales were .73 and .83, respectively. Frequency counts were reliable at .82 for care and .77 for justice.

Correlates: Potential correlates reflected adaptation in school and were collected during end of the year interviews with subjects' sixth grade teachers. These included:

* Teacher rankings of emotional health and peer competence (Connolly & Doyle, 1981)
* Internalizing and Externalizing T-scores from the Teachers Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1986)
* Teacher ratings of school motivation, verbal expressive ability, and ability to work in groups

RESULTS

Sex differences on the orientation scales were tested via one-way ANCOVAs controlling for IQ (see Table 1). Girls scored significantly higher on ability to use and understand care (F=13.2, $p<.001$) and used significantly more care considerations than boys (F=10.1, $p=.002$). Followup analyses showed that girls used more care considerations that emphasized affective consequences of action and maintaining the relationship than boys. No differences were found on justice scales. Contingency analyses of orientation classification of first, preferred and modal solutions failed to find associations between these variables and gender.

Concurrent correlates of orientation scales were examined separately by sex with partial correlations controlling for IQ (see Table 2). Few significant correlates were found and they were generally of small magnitude. For boys, justice reasoning was correlated with emotional health (r=.20, $p=.03$) and verbal expressiveness (r=.18,$p<.05$). For girls, care correlated positively with verbal expressiveness (r=.31, $p<.005$).

The relationships between the concurrent variable set and qualitative orientation indices of first, preferred, and modal solutions were examined in 2 (sex) X 3 (orientation category) MANCOVAs. Results for preferred and modal solution orientation are presented in Table 3. The effect of interest was the sex by orientation interaction, which reached significance for orientation of preferred solution. Girls whose preferred solutions were care predominant or blended orientation showed better adaptation than those with justice predominant reasoning on teacher rankings of emotional health, peer competence and ratings of motivation, ability to work in groups and verbal expressive ability. In contrast, across the set of analyses, boys in the justice predominant or blended orientation groups tended to look better than boys with care predominant orientations. In particular, boys with justice modal solutions had fewer internalizing problems, worked better in groups and were more emotionally healthy than those with modal solutions that were both care and justice or justice predominant.

CONCLUSIONS

Girls appear more thorough than boys in their ability to use and understand the care orientation. These differences do not imply clear preference for orientation by gender, however, and indicate that researchers' choice of orientation index is important.

Although few correlates seem to exist for the ability to use and understand each orientation, an interesting sex difference emerged regarding verbal ability. This variable correlated positively with the proposed dominant orientation for each gender, justice for boys and care for girls. Qualitative orientation indices, especially for preferred solutions, also appear to have differential relationships with concurrent indices of adaptation for each sex. Those who conform to gender typical orientation styles seem also to meet teachers' gender-based expectations for appropriate behavior.

Results suggest the debate regarding moral orientation needs to be broadened to reflect the potential that gender differences may be obscured by strict focus on criterion variables. The examination of both previous and concurrent correlates may provide important insights into this area of study.

Table 1

SEX DIFFERENCES IN QUANTITATIVE ORIENTATION INDICES

Variable	Boys (n=85) Mean	Girls (n=77) Mean	F	p ≤
Care Scale Score	4.4	5.1	13.2	.001
Frequency of Care Considerations	8.1	9.8	10.1	.002
Justice Scale Score	4.5	4.7	2.3	n.s.
Frequency of Justice Considerations	5.8	6.1	3.4	n.s.

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Table 2

PARTIAL CORRELATIONS OF FABLE SCALES WITH CONCURRENT SCHOOL VARIABLES

	BOYS (N=85)		GIRLS (N=77)	
	Care	Justice	Care	Justice
Emotional Health	-.01	.20*	.07	-.04
Peer Competence	-.08	.10	.14	-.04
CBC Externalizing Score	.05	.00	.01	-.06
CBC Internalizing Score	.03	-.11	.01	-.06
School Motivation	.07	.17	.11	-.04
Works Well in Groups	-.17	.17	.17	-.15
Verbal Expressiveness	.01	.18*	.31 **	-.05
WISC-R IQ (zero order)	.19	-.07	-.01	.14

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3

MEAN SCORES BY SEX ON CONCURRENT VARIABLES FOR QUALITATIVE ORIENTATION INDICES

Preferred Solution Orientation *

Variable		Care (N)	Both (N)	Justice (N)	F	p	Contrasts
Emotional Health	Boys	39.9 (48)	49.3 (21)	43.9 (16)			
	Girls	70.1 (34)	51.2 (22)	63.7 (17)	4.0	.022	C > B,J
Peer Competence	Boys	45.9	54.6	46.9			
	Girls	72.9	50.8	59.5	7.1	.002	C > B,J
CBC Externalizing	Boys	56.8	55.4	59.7			
	Girls	53.0	54.9	53.7			
CBC Internalizing	Boys	57.4	55.6	58.7			
	Girls	54.7	54.9	54.8			
Motivation	Boys	3.5	3.7	3.0			
	Girls	4.8	4.0	4.4	4.3	.022	C > B,J
Works Well in Groups	Boys	3.6	4.3	3.6			
	Girls	4.9	4.3	4.2	5.3	.007	C > B, J
Verbal Expression	Boys	4.1	4.5	4.1			
	Girls	4.9	4.6	3.9	5.7	.005	C,B > J

Modal Orientation **

Variable		Care (N)	Both (N)	Justice (N)	F	p	Contrasts
Emotional Health	Boys	37.5 (52)	54.4 (18)	47.2 (16)	2.9	.062	J,B > C
	Girls	62.0 (50)	69.2(18)	46.9 (6)			
Peer Competence	Boys	44.1	53.8	54.2			
	Girls	64.0	63.0	49.6			
CBC Externalizing	Boys	58.2	53.5	57.3			
	Girls	54.9	50.3	56.0	3.0	.058	
CBC Internalizing	Boys	59.3	53.5	55.0	3.2	.045	C > J,B
	Girls	55.8	52.9	53.3			
Motivation	Boys	3.4	3.7	3.3			
	Girls	4.4	4.9	3.8	3.4	.037	B > J
Works Well in Groups	Boys	3.4	4.3	4.0	4.0	.022	J,B > C
	Girls	4.6	4.6	3.8			
Verbal Expression	Boys	4.1	4.4	4.3			
	Girls	4.7	4.6	3.8	2.8	.07	

* Overall MANCOVA results: Sex X Orientation Interaction F = 1.84 (14, 288), p=.033
** Overall MANCOVA results: Sex X Orientation Interaction F = 1.51 (14, 292), p=.108

APPENDIX A

Fable Dilemma

I am going to tell you a story and ask you some questions about it. There are no right or wrong answers here; I am just interested in what you think and what you tell me will help me to understand how kids your age think about these things. Before we start, do you have any questions.

This is the story of The Porcupine and the Mice

It was growing cold, and a porcupine was looking for a home. He found a most desirable cave, but saw it was occupied by a family of mice.

"Would you mind if I shared you home for the Winter?" the porcupine asked the mice.

The generous mice agreed that he could stay and the porcupine moved in. But the cave was small and every time the mice moved around they were scratched by the porcupine's sharp quills. The mice put up with this discomfort as long as they could. Then at last they gathered courage to approach their visitor. "Please leave," they said, "and let us have our cave to ourselves once again."

"Oh no!" said the porcupine. "This place suits me very well."

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